

PRECEPTS FOR LIFE
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SERIES: Revelation (God's Message To The Church)

TITLE: Program 9 – Persecution, Poverty, Prison!

THURSDAY

OPEN

Have you ever said to God, God; I will do anything you want me to, just don't make me suffer? Oh, Beloved, do you know, do you realize what suffering brings to the life of a Christian? It's really not pain. It really is a profound intimacy with God. And that's what we'll see as we look at the book of Revelation and the letter to the church at Smyrna.

PART ONE

Well today, Beloved, we're going to look at Jesus' message, through His angel, to the church at Smyrna. You know, it wasn't too long ago that I was in Smyrna. Now Smyrna is now called Izmir. It's the present day city in Turkey. It's a lovely, lovely city. And when we arrived in Izmir the first thing that we did as a group is we went to the church across the street. It's the Church of Polycarp. It's a church that's so old that you have to go down the stairs to get to the original ruins, the ruins of a church, where a man

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taught by the name of Polycarp, a man who served the Lord for many, many years, 85, to be exact. We're going to hear about him today. But before we hear about him, I want you to hear why that church is so significant to us, and why we rushed off to see it before we ever checked into our hotel across the street. I want us to go to Revelation, chapter 2, verse 8. And it says, "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write." What is being written is being really dictated by Jesus Christ Himself to a church that was existing at that time, a church with which Jesus was thoroughly familiar. Now you remember that every time that we look at a church, the first thing that we are given is a description of the One who is dictating this letter, a description of Jesus Christ. And remember I told you that the description fits something that is in the body of that letter. In other words, Jesus describes Himself to that church in such a way that they will know, hey, what He's saying to me, I can find in Him. He is my all-sufficient One. So watch what He says to this church. And what I'd like to do since it's just several verses, I'd like to read the whole letter and then we'll come back and look at it. And as I read it I would like you to get out your study guide. Now if you don't have that study guide, you can pick up the phone and call us after the program is over or you can download it on the Internet. But listen carefully right now. "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, He who was dead, and has come to life, says this: He says, 'I know your tribulation and your poverty, (but you are rich), and the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.'" It's a very, very short message, isn't it? It's a very, very interesting message. It's an interesting message because He identifies Himself as the first and as the last. If He's the first and He's the

last, then listen, He's everything in between the first and the last. He's the Alpha. He's the Omega. That's another way of saying it. Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet and Omega is the last letter of the Greek alphabet. He says, "I am the first and I am the last." Now listen to what else He says, "... who was dead." He said I was dead. Now what is He telling them? He's telling them to be faithful to death. So He's saying look, I've tasted death. I know what you're going to taste. I know what you're going to experience and believe me, what you and I taste and what you and I experience is nothing compared to what Jesus experienced. Isaiah 52 tells us at the end of that chapter, that, "... Jesus was marred more ...," It doesn't use the term Jesus. But it says He, speaking of the Savior, "... He was marred more than any human being." In other words, the literal Hebrew rendering means this, that when they got through with Jesus; He didn't even look like a human being. That's what they did to Him. So He's telling them to be faithful to death. And He's saying I was dead. But then He goes on to say, "... and I have come to life. The One who was dead and has come to life says this, I was dead; I've come to life." And He's telling this church to, "... be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life." Do you see the parallel? Isn't it absolutely beautiful? Well, you know that He identifies Himself and so we put that description of Christ on our chart. And then the next thing we look for is we look for a commendation. Does He have anything good to say to this church? Yes He does. He says, "I know your tribulation ...," and He says, "... and your poverty ...," He says, "... but you are rich." Now He's saying I know. I know. And see so many times we think, God, you don't know. God, where are you? You don't care. You haven't stopped this. Why are you allowing this? Because we think that pain is an adversary. We think that pain is something that is going to be afflicted on us and in that affliction it will separate us from God. But pain, listen, pain is not designed to separate you from God. It's designed to draw you closer to God. Let me read to you the end of Romans, chapter 8, if you'll go there for

just a minute. In Romans, chapter 8, he's talked about life in the Spirit; "... no longer is it life in the flesh; no longer do we walk according to the flesh. Now we walk according to the Spirit." In Romans, chapter 8 he talks about the fact that, "Jesus' Spirit bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." In Romans, chapter 8, he talks about suffering and he says in verse 16, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God, and if children, heirs of God, heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may be glorified with Him." Now what is He saying to the church at Smyrna? "... be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. I will glorify you with a crown if you'll be faithful unto death." He goes on to say that, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be revealed to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." Whatever you and I go through it doesn't have the same value with the glory that is going to come as a result of that suffering. You know if you were to read through the book of 1 Peter, what you would see is you would see two key repeated words that go together, that are linked together and that is suffering and glory. If you suffer for Him then you will be glorified with Him. Well let me just go back and pick up one other verse. In verse 31 it says, "What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" If God, Precious One, is for you, then who cares who else is against you? Because God is on your team and who is God? He's God. He's the sovereign ruler of all the universe. He's the One that holds the breath of man in His hands. He's the One that has the keys; Jesus has the keys to Hades and to death. In other words, when He acts it is done. It is settled. So let's go on and see what he says. He says in verse 33 of Romans 8, "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the One who justifies; who is the One who condemns? Jesus Christ is He who died. He didn't condemn you. He died for your sins so that you would not be condemned any longer, so that there would be no condemnation to those who are in Him." It says who is the one who condemns? "Christ Jesus is He

who died, yes, rather who was raised. I was dead and I was alive, Jesus says, to the church at Smyrna. He says who was at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written ...,” now listen carefully, “... for Thy sake we are put to death all day long.” If you are suffering it’s for the sake of God. It’s for the sake of the kingdom. It’s for the sake of your own good because suffering purifies you. It says, “For we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered, but in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us; for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor death, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Listen to me very carefully, none of those things that were listed, and you need to go back and read them later, but none of those things that were listed can ever separate you from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus. They don’t separate you; rather they unite you, rather they draw you closer to God where you find His all-sufficient grace. And so what does He say to the church at Smyrna? He says I know your tribulation. I know what you’re suffering. I’m not absent. I’m not an absent God. I’m there; I’m in the midst of it wherever you are. And some of you are prisoners that listen to this program but I want you to know, you’re never alone. The One who was alive and who died and who was raised from the dead is with you.

PART TWO

If, Beloved, you are in tribulation, if you’re going through a trial, you can know this: God knows. He knows your tribulation. If you are poor, God knows. And He says to this church and I want you to see this, because there’s so much teaching on the fact that God never wants you poor. When people come and tell you, listen you can be rich, God doesn’t want you to be

poor, what does God say? What does Jesus say to the church at Smyrna? Smyrna, by the way, comes from myrrh and remember it was myrrh that was brought to Jesus. It was myrrh that was used for funerals. It was an herb or a fragrance that was used. He says, "I know your tribulation and your poverty ...," And then he puts in parentheses, "... but you are rich." So many people that are just after money, that just want God and just give to a ministry in order to get their debts taken care of; I mean don't you see beyond that? Don't you see beyond that? Some people that are just interested in having a large house and having classy clothes and having all these material possessions are just the poorest people in the world, even the poorest Christians in the world. He says, "I know your tribulation. I know your poverty, but you are rich." And he doesn't say I'm going to change your situation. In fact, instead, this is what he says: "I know the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." In other words I know not only your tribulation and your poverty, but I know what is coming against you. I know that these people that are saying that they are Jews are really a synagogue of Satan, they're a gathering of Satan because they want to destroy you. And I want to tell you something: anyone that truly knows God and truly loves God is not out to destroy others. So much has been done in the name of Jesus Christ against the Jews and against people that do not agree, Protestants against Catholics, Catholics against Protestants; that is not of God. And he's saying listen, when you have people that are like this, that say that they love God, he says and yet they're coming against you and they're blaspheming you, he says, I want you to know, they're a synagogue of Satan. And then he says this: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. I know your tribulation. I know your poverty. I know the blasphemy that you're enduring and I want you to know this, I'm not going to deliver you. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison." Now He knows what the devil is going to do and He's going to allow the devil to do it because the devil thinks he's going to win and the devil doesn't

know that he is just closing the cell door and uniting those people closer to Jesus Christ. He says, "Behold the devil is about to cast some of you into prison that you may be tested and you will have tribulation ten days." He says, "Be faithful unto death." He's not saying I'm going to rescue you. He's saying that some of you are going to die. And all I want from you is one thing. I want fidelity to Me all the way. I don't want you to deny Me. I don't want you to give up. I don't want you to turn against Me. I want you to be faithful. I want you to be faithful unto death. And you can be faithful unto death because I'm there with you. I'm the One who was dead and I'm the One who was alive and I promise you that the minute that you pass through death's door I will give you the crown of life. Now listen to what he says. He says, "He who has an ear let him hear. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches." He says, "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." Now what is the second death? The second death, Revelation 20, the last verse says that, "... the second death is the lake of fire." And he says, "Don't you worry, you're not going to be hurt by it because you're gonna pass from death to life." Now, as I say all this, remember I told you about Polycarp; Polycarp, who lived in this city, Polycarp, who was burned at the stake at the age of 86. It was the year 155 A.D. And he was the bishop in Smyrna, he was burned to the stake because he would not deny Jesus Christ. And this is what he said: "I have served Him, served God, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King?" Now when this was written, it was written in 90 A.D. In 64 A.D. Nero began the persecution of Christians, terrible persecutions of Christians. He would tie them to the poles and use them as human torches to light his garden at night. So all the way from Nero, up to Constantine, Constantine had a vision and he came and he conquered in the name of Jesus Christ. Istanbul is the city that he named Constantinople. And Constantine made Christianity acceptable. He made it popular and the persecution stopped. But in between Nero in 64 A.D. and Constantine there were ten periods of persecution. Now whether he meant

this to the church you will have tribulation, literally ten days, or that ten days was figurative of ten periods, it really doesn't matter. It only matters that we are faithful unto death. You say that was so long ago. Well I have a book and it's called *The Heavenly Man*, the remarkable story of Chinese Christian brother Yong. And it's a book that you cannot put down. It's a book of a dear Chinese brother that has suffered greatly for the gospel of Jesus Christ. And he understood a truth about suffering. He understood the truth that suffering purifies. Did you notice that there is no reproof to this church at all? In no way does he reprove them. And the reason he doesn't reprove them is because when you are willing to suffer for righteousness sake then dear friend, then you are purified. I want to show this to you in 1 Peter, chapter 4, verses 1 & 2 and then you can think about it later. It says, "Therefore; since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same purpose, because He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin." In other words when you decide that you're going to suffer for Jesus Christ, when you decide that you're not going to compromise the gospel of Jesus Christ, then you can know this, you know that sin is not an issue. If you're willing to suffer for Him then you're not going to be fooling around with sin and dabbling in it and being enticed in it. And he says, "... because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God." There was no reproof to this suffering church at Smyrna. And there was no reproof because they were rich before God, rich in their love towards Him, rich in their perseverance, rich in their values because they weren't entangled with the affairs of this life. They were willing to suffer. They were willing to go to death. They were willing to go without, materially, because they knew absent from the body, present with the Lord. And Jesus assures them that, "... you be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life."